



❖ ...THESE HORSES
ALMOST A SHADOW,
BROKEN... ❖

from **AFFINITY: MUSTANG**
LINDA HOGAN

FOR LIFE'S SAKE

by Linda Hogan

I was a shy girl, quiet, never aspiring to be a writer, never thinking to assert my Native identity, an identity always clear to my sister and me when we were in Oklahoma with our Chickasaw grandparents. We come from horse and wagon grandparents, and it was not so very long ago. The smell of the pecan trees, the black walnut with flesh I can still smell. Then, in the '50s and '60s, my uncle in Denver took me to powwows, then held in small school gymnasiums. But for the most part we didn't think of our Indian life as something significant. History didn't interest us. We lived in other worlds and places. And yet, within me, I held traditional values. I didn't know then that I would become a traditionally-minded Native woman. I grew into it the way a person grows into their shape, the way a tree grows, without intention, without plan, into a tree.

1

I didn't know, either, that I would become a writer, and the fact that I come from another America has, from the beginning, been the root of my writing.

2

As a girl, even though I was shy, not given to argument, I was one day able to say to the Sunday-school teacher, who believed we were in the house of the Lord, that I felt God when I sat under a tree. It was there, with the tree, that I felt the love of the earth, smelling the soft soil, the blades of grass growing even as I sat.

3

I was a child when I first used words to argue for a tree. It was my first argument, maybe the first one of my otherwise quiet life. Now I know that we also grow into our words.

4

And, writing this, I sit beneath a tree. Sitting here, I have so far watched a hummingbird mating ritual, the honey bees at the balm tree, the unusually marked bees in flowering chives. A skinny fox sits on the hill above.

5

I didn't know, when I thought God was a tree, that my ancestors, on the night of their removal from Mississippi to Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears, were witnessed touching the leaves of the trees, the trunks, crying. *Their old friends, the trees*, is how the observer wrote about their removal to Oklahoma, Indian Territory.

6

In this mystery of human growing became, within me, a history contained, memory carried from far back, ancestral knowledge.

7



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GLOSSARY

aboriginal *adj.* being one of the original inhabitants of a region

affinity *n.* a feeling of closeness to someone or something because you share interests, beliefs, or qualities

ancestors *n.* persons from whom one is descended, especially those more remote than grandparents

ceremonial *adj.* used in ceremonies

Chickasaw *n.* a Native American people who originally inhabited the southeastern regions of the United States

constellation *n.* a group of stars with a recognizable pattern or a name

cosmos *n.* the world or universe, often referring to outer space

Endangered Species Act *n.* a law that protects certain wildlife that has been nearly destroyed

Everglades *n.* a large swamp in southern Florida that is known for its wildlife

Geronimo (1829-1909) an Apache leader who resisted U.S. government efforts to move his people onto reservations

kinship *n.* a relationship among family members, or others, based on shared customs, beliefs, or values

Kiowa *n.* a Native American people who originally inhabited the south central region of the United States

military strategist *n.* a military officer in charge of making plans and decisions for fighting an enemy

powwow *n.* a gathering or meeting of Native Americans; a ceremony that features drumming, singing, and dancing

Seminole *n.* a Native American people who originally inhabited the southeastern region of the United States, particularly Florida

sentient *adj.* having the ability to perceive things through the senses

Trail of Tears *n.* the trail that members of the Cherokee nation took in 1838 and 1938, when the U.S. government forcibly removed them from their native lands and sent them to territories in the west

Looking back, I can say that I was a poet by heart; I didn't need words at first. I was an observer. I only grew into a writing life. My work was, and still is, a way of being in the world. It is an acknowledgment that we live in a sentient world. With my work, I try to see the world whole again. My novels, especially, give Indian people dignity, reality in a world of stereotypes, and spiritual wholeness. I show us present, fully present, in front of, and before, the background of America. I always acknowledge the intelligence of the elders, and honor the world. It is work of hope, and I try to hold within it the Indian traditional understanding of the cosmos, one that contains constellations called Swimming Ducks, Buffalo, different than the Western constellations. I also know the importance of the tiniest root of a plant, that it contributes to our world. My writing is larger than I am. It comes from some other place I can't name. I am grateful for it. In it there are the undercurrents of earth, waves of ocean, discoveries unknown to me:

Once, in the redwood forest, I heard the beat, something like a drum or heart coming from the ground and trees and wind. That underground current stirred a kind of knowing inside me, a kinship and longing...I think of the people who came before me and how they knew the placement of stars in the sky, watching the moving sun long and hard enough to witness how a certain angle of light touched a stone only once a year. Without written records, they knew the gods of every night, the small, fine details of the world around them and of immensity above...It is a world of elemental attention, of all things working together, listening to what speaks in the blood. Whichever road I follow, I walk in the land of many gods, and they love and eat one another. Tonight, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and Listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.

(Excerpt from "Walking")

I became one who would find her way into the world through writing. I reached for the language of a larger-than-merely-human world, and through this reach, my work as a writer has been in constant movement and change, between poetry, essay, and story. Stories have

become increasingly important to me, as has my continuing study of ceremonial literature from many different tribes, each containing an enormously complex knowledge, understanding of the world, and values.

In all traditions, in the views of aboriginal peoples all over the world, there is a known, remembered, relationship between humans and the cosmos. The placement of the human is merely a part of the Great Mysterious. Cultures that have survived 20,000 to 60,000 years can't be too wrong, I have decided.

But most importantly, I have had to learn how to wait, listen, and follow, as in the essay above. I have had to learn, as now, sitting under a tree, for the work to reveal itself, to come to me.

In my novel, *Power*, the main character has to choose between worlds she can inhabit, the world of the elders and their great knowledge, or the world of America. She knows geometry, English, the American world, yet she must decide whether to leave this world for that of her elders who live in their own community, with their own ways:

At school we hear about imploding stars, stars that fall inward the way I am falling, but there is no place ever to touch down, there is no bottom to inward falling...I whisper to myself as I walk and the moonlight touches me, "I leave this world. I leave war and fear. I leave success and failure, owned things, rooms of light that was once a river, and is now reduced."

This book began as a research project. I had been on an all-Indian working committee for the reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act. There was a controversial case where a Seminole man killed an endangered Florida panther. I went to Florida to read the court records, planning to write an article for a law quarterly. But what came to me as I was in the Everglades was the voice of that main character, Omishto, one of those voices writers hear, and I followed what she wanted to say.

My writing becomes a search in this way, and finding a language, words for what can't be said in ordinary language; shades of meaning, degrees of love, moments of wisdom that do not come from me, but from thousands of years of learning and being. When I made my first unlearned words on the page, I did so to give a

voice to and for the voiceless, whether it is an endangered animal of the book *Power*, or historical figures such as the woman Lozen, the military strategist of Geronimo, in *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*. I want them to be known in this world, to be important here, to be remembered.

15 This morning as I sit beneath a tree, the newly hatched spiders are leaving. The sun shines on their strands of silk. The barn swallows are flying back and forth from mud to their clay nests in a world of their maps. I can hear the deep breathing of the horses behind the trees. On one of them the letters U.S. are frozen into the fur, followed by symbols that will always define her, declare her, tell her story. She, too, is another part of America, a rounded-up creation from the wild. And the Indian horses have a history not unlike our own. The military, trying to round up the tribes and move them all into Oklahoma, tried to cripple their movement by killing all their horses, sometimes by the thousands. It's a part of history that also makes me write:

AFFINITY: Mustang

*Tonight after the sounds of day
have given way
she stands beneath the moon,
a gray rock shining.
She matches the land,
belonging.*

*She has a dark calm face,
her hooves like black stone
belong to the earth
the way it used to be,
long grasses
as grass followed rain
or wind laid down the plains of fall
or in winter now when
her fur changes and becomes snow
or her belly hair turns
the color of red water willows
at the creek,
her legs black as trees.*

*These horses
almost a shadow,
broken.*

*When we walk together
in the tall grasses, I feel her
as if I am walking with mystery,*

*with beauty and fierce powers,
as if for a while we are the same animal
and remember each other from before.*

*Or sometimes I sit on earth
and watch the wind blow her mane and tail
and the waves of dry grasses
all one way
and it calls to mind
how I've come such a long way
through time
to find her.*

*Some days I sing to her
remembering the Kiowa man
who sang to cover the screams
of their ponies killed by the Americans
the songs I know in my sleep.*

*Some nights, hearing her outside,
I think she is to the earth
what I am to her,
belonging.*

*Sometimes it seems as if we knew each other
from a time before our journeys here
In secret, I sing to her, the old songs
the ones I speak in my sleep.*

*But last night it was her infant that died
after the kinship and movement
of so many months
Tonight I sit on the straw
and watch as the milk streams from her nipples
to the ground. I clean her face.
I've come such a long way through time
to find her and
It is the first time
I have ever seen a horse cry.*

*Sing then, the wind says,
Sing.*

I love the world. I love everything that lives upon it. And so I write, like this morning under the tree. It is a world of mystery and beauty; this is what gives me words, and those words come from the earth, the language of the land, the remembering the dismembered of the world, as writer Meridel LeSueur called it. I write to be one person who helps to put the world, the lives of humans and non-humans back together, to make them whole again. I do this for the future. I do this for life's sake.

Courtesy of Jane Hogan



LINDA HOGAN

Linda Hogan is a Chickasaw writer. She is the author of several books, including *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of The Natural World*, and the novels *Power*, *Mean Spirit*, and *Solar Storms*. *Mean Spirit* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Hogan's collection of poems entitled *The Book of Medicines* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Hogan has received numerous awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Guggenheim fellowship, the Lannan Award for outstanding achievement in poetry, and the Five Civilized Tribes Museum playwriting award. In 1998, she was given the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas.

Besides poetry and fiction, Hogan's works include nonfiction. She wrote a documentary narrative about the history of American Indian Religious Freedom, *Everything Has A Spirit*, which aired on public television. Hogan was co-editor, with Brenda Peterson, of *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals* and *The Sweet Breathing of Plants: Women Writing on the Green World*. These writers also co-authored the book *Sightings: The Gray Whales' Mysterious Journey*. Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches Over The World: A Native Memoir* was published in 2002.

Hogan is one of three Indian writers hired by the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian to co-author a book for the museum's grand opening. Her section of the book is on tradition and how it has been carried into recent times.

(opposite, top left) A walking trail through Muir Woods, a redwood forest in California once inhabited by the Coast Miwok Indians.